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TAKING THE PLUNGE

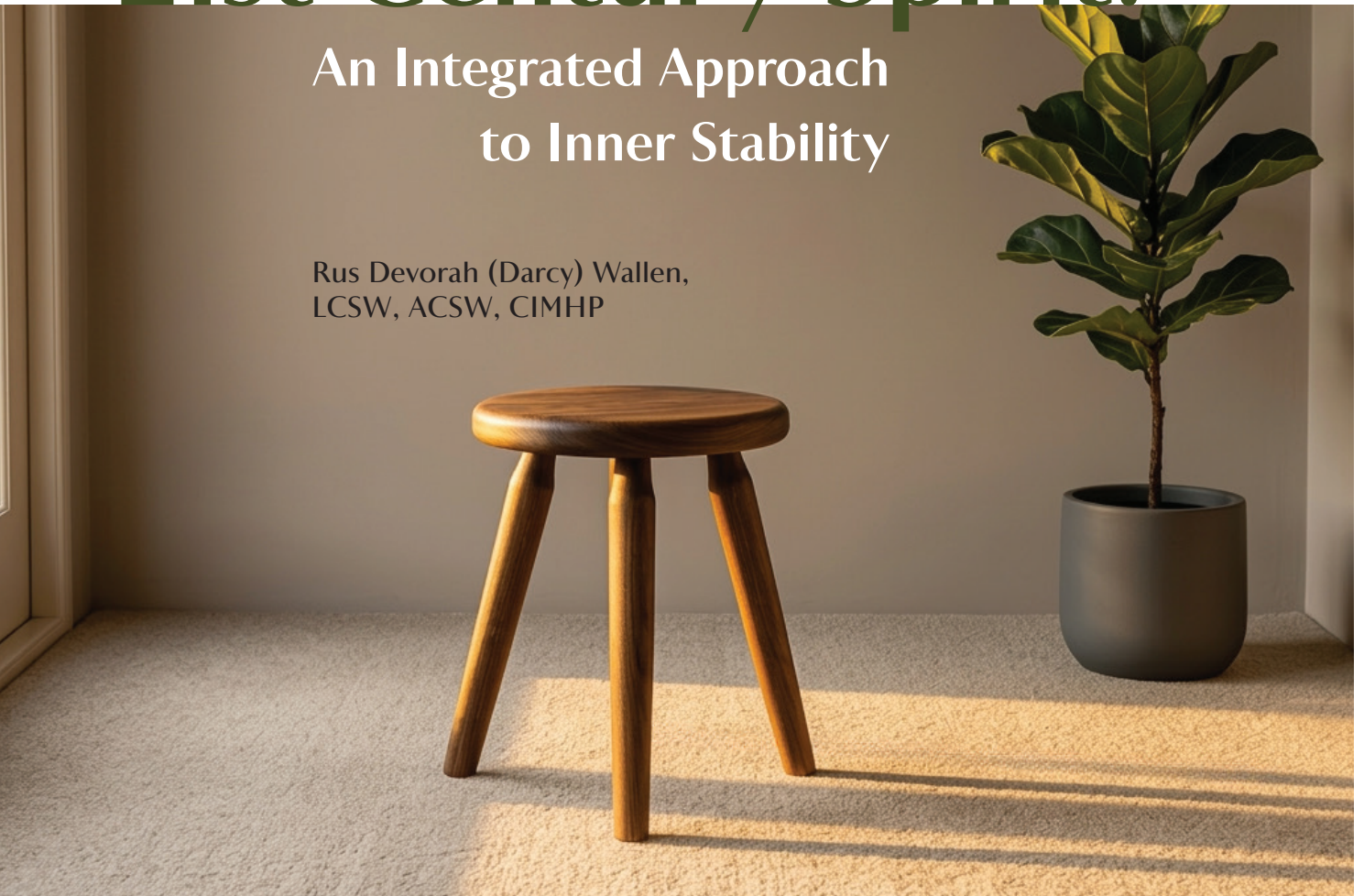
**TAMING THE 21ST CENTURY SPIRIT:
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO INNER STABILITY**

**Rus Devorah (Darcy) Wallen,
LCSW, ACSW, CIMHP**

Taming the 21st Century Spirit:

An Integrated Approach
to Inner Stability

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Introduction: The Modern Dilemma and an Ancient Blueprint

The spirit of the 21st century is in a state of dis-ease. This is not a diagnosis, and it is not an accusation. It is an observation. We are living inside a cultural environment that places unprecedented demands on the human nervous system. We are digitally distracted, chronically overstimulated, and immersed in a constant stream of information that never truly turns off. Notifications follow us into the kitchen, into the bedroom, and even into moments that were once private and quiet. Thank G-d for Shabbos.

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The technologies designed to make life easier have, in many ways, made life faster, louder, and more complicated. Tasks that once required sustained focus now demand constant attention-switching. Social comparison is no longer occasional; it is ambient. Bad news travels faster than good news. Urgency is rewarded more than discernment. Over time, this environment quietly reshapes how we think, how we feel, and how we respond.

In my clinical work, I see the consequences of this everywhere. Anxiety and depression are no longer rare or exceptional experiences. They are woven into the background of ordinary life. People who are capable, conscientious, and deeply values-driven often describe feeling scattered, tense, and internally noisy. Even moments of rest are interrupted by mental replay, anticipation, or self-critique. The body may be still, but the mind is not.

One of the most common expressions of this strain is a runaway internal monologue that I call the Merry-Go-Round of the Mind. Thoughts race ahead, loop backward, and rehearse conversations long after they are over. Small concerns balloon into imagined futures. The mind spins stories that feel urgent and convincing, even when nothing dangerous is actually happening in the present moment. I refer to this experience as the Machshovah Merry-Go-Round. Many people recognize it instantly when it is named. They feel it not only in their thoughts, but in their breathing, in their shoulders, in their gut.

The remedy for this modern dilemma is not a single technique, a slogan, or a quick fix. It is not about suppressing emotion or forcing positivity. What is required is a holistic framework for restoring inner stability, one that respects the full complexity of the human being. The model I use and teach is called the Three-Legged Stool. This approach is rooted in a teaching articulated by the Alter Rebbe in the Tanya, which describes a “long way that is short, and

a short way that is long.” In contemporary language, this teaching offers a profound insight into how real change happens. Sustainable change is rarely dramatic or immediate. It does not usually arrive in a single breakthrough moment. Instead, it is built through small, consistent, intentional practices that accumulate quietly over time. At first, these practices feel effortful. With repetition, they become familiar. Eventually, they feel natural. Once the path is worn in, walking it no longer requires constant exertion. You are simply there.

This essay explores how an integrated model that blends modern neuroscience with timeless Torah wisdom offers a practical and compassionate path toward reclaiming inner sovereignty. It provides a blueprint for calming the body, settling the mind, and soothing the soul, so that we can live with steadiness and dignity in a world that rarely slows down for us.

The Core Challenge: The Machshovah Merry-Go-Round

To understand how to restore calm, we must first understand what disrupts it. The Machshovah Merry-Go-Round is not a sign of weakness or poor character. It is a predictable response of the human brain under conditions of chronic stimulation and stress. Often, it begins with something small. A comment made in passing. A mistake. A delayed response. The mind then does what minds are very good at doing: It fills in the gaps.

A wrong turn while driving becomes, “I will be late.” Late quickly becomes, “They will be annoyed.” Annoyed turns into, “I always mess things up.” And before long, the mind arrives at a sweeping conclusion: “I’ll lose my job.”

What began as a minor logistical inconvenience has now escalated into an emotional crisis. The nervous system responds as though something catastrophic is unfolding, even though the original event was entirely manageable. Beneath this mental spiral lies a well-documented neurobiological process. The amygdalae, two almond-shaped structures deep within the brain, function as sentries. Their task is to scan for danger and protect us from harm. When the amygdala perceives threat, whether real or imagined, it sounds an internal alarm. Stress hormones surge through the bloodstream. Blood flow shifts away from reflective thinking and toward rapid response.

The body prepares for survival. I often refer to this as an amygdaloid hijack.

During such a hijack, access to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for judgment, perspective, and choice, becomes limited. We are not at our wisest in these moments. We become reactive. Our thinking narrows. Our interpretations harden. Later, when calm returns, we may look back and feel surprised at our own rigidity or intensity.

Compounding this process is something known as the negativity bias. This bias actually makes perfect sense. Think of our ancestors, who needed to remember danger more vividly than comfort in order to survive. Or imagine someone is walking through a forest and notices movement in the leaves several feet ahead. He immediately jumps back, assuming it is a snake. Once he regains composure, he realizes it was his own movement that bumped a crooked branch. He failed to perceive the connection between his action and the motion he interpreted as threat. The negativity bias exists to protect us in the face of real potential danger.



In the 21st century, however, this same system often overreacts. We rarely face life-threatening dangers, yet constant digital interruptions, distractions, and stimuli keep this mechanism activated. Instead of resetting, the nervous system remains on alert, subtly raising our baseline level of arousal. We live with protective conveniences such as secure homes, climate control, and accessible food, yet internally we often feel braced.

In modern life, the negativity bias frequently works against us. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson describes

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it succinctly when he observes that the brain is “like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.” Compliments slide off. Criticism sticks. A single difficult interaction can outweigh many neutral or pleasant ones. Without deliberate intervention, the mind tilts toward scanning for what is wrong.

To make this process more tangible, imagine a carnival merry-go-round. There is an operator whose job is to control the speed and stop the ride when necessary. That operator represents the prefrontal cortex. When we are calm and regulated, the operator is present, attentive, and able to slow things down or stop the ride when needed.

When we get stuck in a thought loop, it is because the operator has wandered off. He left his post first for a hot dog with everything on it, then another. On the way back, he played a few rounds of a game to win pushies for his kids. He noticed cotton candy and could not resist. Being a responsible button operator, he then detoured to wash his sticky hands. Meanwhile, the ride has been spinning wildly out of control, leaving the riders dizzy and nauseous.

Our work is not to shame the operator. It is to train him to stay at the panel, ready to press the stop button before the ride gains too much momentum.

Our vulnerability to this state increases dramatically when we are in what I call **HALTSS**: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired, Sick, or Stressed. In these states, the prefrontal cortex goes partially offline. Even wise, capable people can feel hijacked by reactions that do not reflect their deeper values or best selves.

Understanding this dynamic is not about assigning blame. It is about gaining a map. When we recognize the pattern early, we can intervene earlier. We can respond with compassion rather than criticism. Understanding this core challenge of the

runaway mind is the first step toward building the comprehensive, integrated solution required to stabilize it.

A Framework for Sovereignty: The Three-Legged Stool and the Inner King

The Three-Legged Stool is my structural safety response to the Machshovah Merry-Go-Round. I did not develop this model only because my clients needed it. I developed it because I needed it too. I was searching for a way to live that felt grounded rather than reactive, spacious rather than frantic. I did not want to manage anxiety. I wanted to build stability.

As I began to identify what genuinely helped me stay regulated and present, I deepened my study. I trained in mind-body medicine at Harvard's Benson-Henry Institute, learning from leaders in the field and meeting Dr. Herbert Benson, the originator of the Relaxation Response, himself. Although the program was framed as mind-body medicine, spirituality was always present. It could not be fully removed without losing something essential. Over time, it became clear to me that tranquility without meaning often turns into a quieter form of fear. Calm without a spiritual anchoring does not hold.

My Three-Legged Stool metaphor is intentionally simple. A stool with one leg cannot stand. A stool with two legs will wobble and fall with the slightest nudge. Stability requires three points of contact. The three legs of the stool are the Soul, the Body, and the Mind. Many people are familiar with mind-body approaches to health. These approaches are critically important. But without attention to the soul, they remain incomplete. The soul is not an optional add-on. It is the organizing center of the human being.

This integrated model has a profound parallel in Torah wisdom: The concept of the Melech, the inner king. The proper inner hierarchy of a healthy human being is reflected in the vertical spelling of the Hebrew word for king:

- *Mo'ach* (מ): The mind and intellect, positioned at the top to discern, evaluate, and guide.
- *Leiv* (ל): The heart and emotions, situated beneath it to feel deeply while aligning with wisdom.
- *Kaveid* (כ): The body and its drives, symbolized by the liver, forming the base and serving higher purpose rather than dictating it.



When this hierarchy is intact, a person experiences coherence. When it becomes disordered, inner instability follows. Torah literature captures this vividly by rearranging the very same letters of *Melech*. *Lemech* represents a state in which emotion dominates unchecked, clouding judgment and perspective. As I sometimes say with a bit of rhyme, “The *Lemech*’s a fool; his emotions rule.”

Kelem, another permutation of the same letters, means disgrace. It reflects the state in which impulse and physical drive override discernment, pulling a person toward reactive or self-defeating behavior.

These are not abstract word games. They describe lived psychological states. They closely resemble the feeling of being caught on the Machshovah Merry-Go-Round, or what neuroscience would describe as an amygdala hijack.

The practical toolkit that follows is designed to calm each of the three legs: Body, Mind, and Soul. By tending to each domain deliberately, we restore inner alignment. The stool becomes steady again. The sovereign part of the self resumes its place at the helm. The Three-Legged Stool exists to help restore *Melech* mode. By calming the *neshama*, relaxing the body, and settling the mind we place the king back on his throne.

Forging the Legs of the Stool: A Practical Toolkit for Calm

Understanding a model is helpful. But understanding alone does not change behavior. Insight is not transformation. What changes lives are practices that can be repeated on ordinary days, not just during crises. What follows are tools designed to calm each

leg of the stool. They are not meant to feel like three separate, time-consuming efforts done in isolation. They are designed to work together, to simplify the process rather than complicate it. When practiced in the sequence I recommend, they become both easier and more effective. Over time, they begin to feel almost effortless.

I call this sequence “The Cashew” method of the Three-Legged Stool.



The Cashew

A cashew has a distinctive shape. It is broader at the top, narrows slightly, curves inward into an imperfect “C,” and then settles into a smaller tail at the base. That curve provides a helpful visual map.

The wide upper curve represents beginning activity with the soul. From there, we move across to the other part of the top, the body. Finally, the curve descends to the last leg of the stool, the mind.

Practically speaking, this means doing the *bitachon* work, the soul component, in the evening to create a “calm balm” for the *neshama*. Just before falling asleep, we move into slow breathing to relax the body. The mind component, the meditation, is practiced first thing in the morning. If you are able to wake a few minutes earlier and remain in bed while practicing, I affectionately call it a “beditation.”

Leg One: Calming the Soul

The practice is simple.

Each evening, sometime between sundown and settling into bed, immerse yourself in something that strengthens trust.

This can be reading a single letter from the Rebbe’s collection *In Good Hands*. It can be learning even a few lines of *Sha’ar HaBitachon*, The Gate of Trust, from *Chovos Ha’Levavos*. It can be watching a short teaching on *bitachon*. The specific content matters less than the act itself: Returning the heart to the truth that you are not alone in the unfolding of your life. That Hashem has your back. As *bitachon* enters, something shifts. The emotional grip loosens. The shoulders lower. The breath deepens. The soul remembers its native state: To lean on Him, to let go and let G-d.

I recommend this practice at night because by then we are often more depleted from the day’s activities and stressors. Night is literally and figuratively darker. The mind is quieter, but often more vulnerable. The soul needs its calm balm. Spiritual regulation begins with *bitachon* because *bitachon* restores the inner ground. Without it, the mind scrambles for control, the heart reels from uncertainty, and the body braces for imagined catastrophe. I often call *bitachon* the antithesis of and antidote to worry.

The Rebbe emphasized this again and again. *Bitachon* is not an optional emotional accessory. It is a stabilizing force that changes how a person processes life. In his letters, especially those collected in *In Good Hands*, the Rebbe guides people through fear, illness, uncertainty, and loss not only by telling them what to trust, but by teaching them how to trust. He demonstrates that trust itself generates a calmer mind, a steadier will, clearer perspective, and even physiological resilience.

Modern neuroscience affirms this. When a person experiences genuine trust, whether in Hashem, in a caregiver, in a mentor, or in the goodness of life, the amygdala’s alarm response decreases. The prefrontal cortex regains influence. The autonomic nervous system shifts from threat mode toward parasympathetic regulation. In other words, *bitachon* quiets the body as surely as it quiets the heart. Spiritual dysregulation often appears as the opposite of *bitachon*. It shows up as over-responsibility, anxious forecasting, existential panic, emotional

“Is G-d really in need of your worry? Or will He succeed in finding good solutions even without your worrying?”

rigidity, or the belief that everything depends solely on one’s personal force. This stance is exhausting. The human nervous system was not designed to live in constant perceived aloneness. When a person lives as if everything rests entirely on their shoulders, the system eventually overloads.

Bitachon counters this by reminding the heart, repeatedly, that life is supported. Even with a relaxed body and a trained mind, something essential is missing if the soul does not feel safe. Trust allows the nervous system to settle at a deeper level. The Lubavitcher Rebbe captured this with gentle humor when he asked, “Is G-d really in need of your worry? Or will He succeed in finding good solutions even without your worrying?” When the soul feels held, everything else settles more easily.

And from there, we move into the next curve of the Cashew.

Leg Two: Relaxing the Body

After the Calm Balm of the *neshama*, we prepare the body for slowing down and rest.

The body is the first responder to stress. When the amygdala sounds its alarm, the sympathetic nervous system activates. Heart rate increases. Muscles tighten. Breathing becomes shallow. Digestion slows. This system is brilliant in short-term emergencies. When activated chronically, it becomes exhausting. Because the body responds more quickly than thought, it makes sense to prepare for sleep by calming physiology directly. One of the most effective ways to do this is through breath.

Across cultures and modern research, three principles appear again and again in practices that reliably reduce physiological arousal:

- Breathing through the nose slows airflow and engages calming reflexes.
- Slowing the overall pace of breathing signals safety to the nervous system.
- Lengthening the exhale activates the vagus nerve

and parasympathetic system, supporting rest and repair.

- Babies breathe this way naturally. Under stress, adults tend to abandon it, opening the mouth and breathing rapidly. Returning to nasal, slower breathing is a way of reminding the body that it is safe in the present moment.

This practice is deeply echoed in Torah. In Bereishis it says, “*Vayipach b’apav nishmas chayim*” — “And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Life entered through the nostrils. Breath and soul are not separate systems; they are intertwined from the very beginning of human existence. The very channel through which the *neshama* entered the body was the nose. When we return to nasal breathing, we are not simply using a technique. We are aligning with the original design of how life was given.



A practical way to engage this is called the Breathing Contest™. A “game” where you are the only contestant.

The Breathing Contest becomes the perfect bridge from the calm of the soul to the settling of the body. This is best done when you are genuinely ready to fall asleep, after the preliminaries are complete. Pajamas on. Teeth brushed. Supplements taken. The room prepared for rest, lights off, devices away. Set

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In Torah, this is the essence of teshuvah. Return. Renewal. Re-routing.*

the stage for sleep first and then begin the Breathing Contest. Here are the simple directions:

Lying on your bed, inhale gently through the nose. Then exhale either through the nose or through a small mouth aperture. If using the mouth, make the opening smaller than a nostril if possible. The smaller aperture slows the exhale further. Count the seconds of your inhale. Then count the length of your exhale.

Your goal is to aim for a longer exhale, because the exhale activates parasympathetic relaxation and lowers physiological arousal. The counting functions on multiple levels. It monitors your progress. Your score tonight becomes tomorrow's starting point. You gently aim to lengthen the exhale over time. The counting also functions as a form of meditation without needing to be called one. Counting replaces rumination; it creates a focal point. The mind cannot rehearse tomorrow's problems while it is occupied with counting.

Breath slows. Heart rate follows. Muscles soften. The body receives the message: It is safe to fall asleep. By practicing this nightly and using its simpler corollary intermittently during the day (Basic Breathing for Beginners™) during moments of stress, this response becomes second nature. Familiar. Accessible. Eventually, it is available more quickly and needed less urgently, because the body is learning how to relax as its baseline state.

Leg Three: Calming the Mind

Stress is unavoidable. What differs is how we relate to it.

Viktor Frankl famously wrote that “between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom.” Meditation is a way of practicing access to that space. It develops the capacity to pause, to remain present, almost to experience a subtle slowing

of time in moments that would otherwise sweep us away.

Meditation is often misunderstood as emptying the mind. That is not how I define it. My simplest definition is this:

Returning to your chosen focus again and again. The mind wanders. You notice. You bring it back. It wanders again. You bring it back again. Over time, this repeated returning becomes second nature.

It builds an internal reflex to come back to now. I refer to this returning as “the meditative motion of the mind.” It is not static. It is rhythmic. Like a fisherman casting a line and reeling it back. The thought goes out. You notice. You gently reel it back. The “fish” might be fighting you— it may not be so easy. However, each return strengthens the prefrontal cortex and reduces the grip of automatic reactivity. The return itself is the training.

In my “Beginner’s Meditation on the Breath,” the focus is on returning to the sensations of breathing. Not abstract concepts. Not complex imagery. Simply noticing the temperature of the air at the nostrils. The speed of the inhale. The length of the exhale. The subtle pauses in between. The mind wanders. That is what minds do. The work is the coming back.

This kind of meditation does not require special equipment, exotic environments, or long stretches of silence. It can be practiced while walking, sitting, waiting for appointments, or even while washing dishes. Over time, it builds the capacity to observe thoughts without automatically boarding them. Thoughts are like clouds passing through the sky. Or like trains pulling into a station. You do not need to get on every one.

The goal is not to eliminate thought. The goal is to reclaim authorship.

When practiced regularly, meditation strengthens exactly the neural circuits that are weakened during an amygdaloid hijack. The more we practice returning, the more accessible that “space” becomes in real life moments of stress. Slowly, the prefrontal

cortex becomes more available. The operator stays closer to the panel.

The Science of Lasting Change: How Practice Becomes Nature

Neuroplasticity offers a scientific explanation for why these practices matter. The brain changes in response to repeated experience. Repeated actions strengthen synaptic connections. Dendrites extend new branches. Myelin thickens around neural pathways, improving the speed and efficiency of signal transmission. Dopamine reinforces successful learning. Over time, what once required effort begins to feel natural.

Pirkei Avos articulated this long before neuroscience did: “*Mitzvah goreres mitzvah*”— One mitzvah draws another in its wake. Repetition builds momentum.

The Backyard Neighbors metaphor illustrates this beautifully.

Imagine two families whose yards are separated by a fence. When their children become friends, they begin running back and forth through a gate. At first, the grass remains untouched. With each crossing, however, a faint trail appears. Over weeks, the path becomes worn. The grass disappears. A permanent dirt path connects the two yards.

This is how the brain works. Repeated thoughts and behaviors carve pathways. The more frequently they are used, the more efficient they become.

As a young woman, I inadvertently carved a powerful and problematic path in my own mind. Seeking focus for my ADD, I learned Transcendental Meditation. I was told my mantra was neutral. It was not. It was the Sanskrit name of a Hindu deity. I practiced it faithfully for years, twenty minutes twice a day. It became etched into my neural circuits. When I later learned of its idolatrous meaning, I stopped immediately. But stopping the practice did not immediately erase the pathway. The mantra continued to arise, like a leaky faucet. Neural grooves do not disappear simply because we decide they should.

When I discussed this struggle with Rabbi Manis Friedman, he advised me to memorize the Twelve Pesukim. Each time the mantra surfaced, I was to replace it deliberately with a *possuk*. Thought substitution. Again and again. It was remarkably effective. Over time, that substitution rewired my mind.

This is the continuation of the Backyard Neighbors

story. Years later, one family moves away. The gate is closed. The path is no longer used. The new neighbors reseed the lawn. With time, grass grows back. The old trail fades.



In neuroscience, this is called synaptic pruning. Unused pathways weaken and recede. In Torah, this is the essence of *teshuvah*. Return. Renewal. Re-routing.

The Rambam describes the complete penitent as someone who encounters the same situation that once led to error and responds differently. Modern psychology calls this stimulus control and behavioral restructuring. Torah and neuroscience converge here. True change is not merely resisting an impulse. It is building a stronger alternative pathway.

This process of transformation is driven by identifiable biological mechanisms:

- Synaptic strengthening occurs when repeated firing between neurons reinforces their connection. As Donald Hebb famously stated, “Neurons that fire together wire together.” Each repetition deepens the groove.
- Dendritic growth expands the branching capacity of neurons, increasing the number of potential connections. The more you practice a skill or thought pattern, the more structurally supported it becomes.
- Myelin strengthening improves signal efficiency. Repeated use thickens the myelin sheath surrounding axons, allowing neural signals to travel faster and more smoothly. What once felt clumsy becomes fluid.
- Dopamine learning reinforces behavior. Small successes release dopamine, signaling to the brain that the behavior is worth repeating. Motivation and

reward become linked to the new pattern.

- Basal ganglia habit formation allows effortful actions to become automatic. With repetition, behaviors shift from conscious deliberation to embedded habit circuitry.

Taken together, these mechanisms explain the teaching of the long way that becomes the short way. The long way is repetition. The short way is the automaticity that eventually follows.

At first, calming the soul, relaxing the body, and training the mind require intention and many small repetitions. With time, they become the new default for soul, body, and mind.

We are not merely managing stress. We are reshaping the architecture of our inner world.

Conclusion: From Wobble to Sovereignty

The pace of modern life will not slow down. Digital noise, information overload, and ambient anxiety are not disappearing. What can change is how we meet them.

The Three-Legged Stool offers not just a technique, but a posture toward life.

- Calm the soul.
- Relax the body.
- Settle the mind.

The goal is not a life free of problems. That was never promised. The goal is a sovereign life, a life in which the “chooser” is restored to leading the throne. Whether we call that chooser the *Melech*, the prefrontal cortex, or even the faithful button operator at the merry-go-round, the aim is the same: To remain in charge of our inner world, responding to life with wisdom rather than reacting with fear. Through small, consistent practices, we strengthen the three legs of the stool. We calm the soul. We relax the body. We train the mind. Effort slowly becomes nature. What once felt deliberate begins to feel steady. The long way of repetition becomes the short way of familiarity.

After a while, you do not just use the stool. You sit differently in your own life. There is less wobble. More dignity. A quieter confidence. A deeper sense that you are not at the mercy of every passing thought or circumstance.

And that is what it means to come home to yourself. ■

Rus Devorah (Darcy) Wallen, LCSW, ACSW, CIMHP has had a longstanding connection with Bais Rivkah, supporting its educational mission for over four decades. From 5743-5748, she contributed to the beloved Bais Rivkah High School productions, arranging harmonies and working closely with the girls' choirs to elevate their musical expression on stage. During her first year of graduate school, she completed her MSW internship at Bais Rivkah High School, offering counseling, group facilitation, and guidance that helped students navigate personal and emotional challenges.

Today, Rus Devorah is the Founder of Toratherapeutics® and NOGA Wellness Solutions®, where she integrates advanced trauma therapies, MBCT, neuroscience, and the Neuro-Arts—music, psychotherapy, and education—to promote whole-person emotional wellbeing. She has returned to Bais Rivkah many times to provide professional development workshops for Bais Rivkah Seminary students, and special trainings for mechanchos, equipping educators with practical Torah-aligned tools to support students' resilience and spiritual growth.

A licensed clinical social worker and certified integrative health professional, she also specializes in therapeutic sound and meditation, producing NOGA® Sound Solutions healing audio under rabbinic supervision. Her work continues to reflect a deep commitment to Klal Yisroel, strengthening the women who guide the next generation.

From the BR stage to today's global workshop platforms, Rus Devorah remains dedicated to nurturing healthy minds and strong Jewish hearts, helping teachers and students alike shine with confidence, dignity, and light.

*The Beginner's
Meditation on the
Breath - Audio:*



*The Beginner's
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